

Troubleshooting: Dealing with Common Writing Problems

by April Kelley

Sentence Fluency

Problem: short, choppy sentences break the text up into bite-sized pieces.

Strategies:

1. **Remember sentence combining.** Make up your own samples of short, choppy writing. They can be based upon famous texts such as Macbeth, the Constitution, Winnie the Pooh, or even based upon a cookbook, lawn mower warranty, legal contract, or headline news story. Then, let your students revise it and compare their revisions to the originals.
2. **Turn on the music.** Music illustrates rhythm and flow like nothing else. Make your own selection of rock, rap, jazz, or pop so long as it has a definite beat and understandable lyrics. Some lyrics are repetitious, some not. Be careful. Repetition for effect can be stirring; repetition for its own sake is deadly.

Problem: All sentences begin the same way. I think I'm drifting off.

Strategies:

1. **Ask students to highlight or list sentence beginnings.** Do this with the first 3-4 words in each sentence. Do they all look alike? There's the problem.
2. **Practice variations.** Start with any sentence: "You have to be clever to survive school." Ask students to rewrite the sentence in as many ways as possible in a certain amount of time, like 3 minutes. You may also give students sample sentence beginnings to help. Examples: *Being clever... Surviving school... Survivors... School... Cleverness...*
3. **Use transition words.** Teach students to add some transition words to add rhythm and flow to their writing and vary their sentence beginnings.

some ideas taken from "Creating Writers" by Vicki Spandel and
"Beginning Writing: Using the 6-trait Writing Framework" by Lori Jamison Rog

Problem: It has variety - but it still sounds mechanical.

Strategy:

1. ***Hit the end note.*** Where is the power of a sentence? At the end. In time, most experienced writers learn to embed the most important words or thought at the end of a sentence, like a punch. After a while, this becomes automatic but at first, you have to point it out. Which of these sentences has more power?

- Victor turned, slowly raised the gun, leveled it, and fired.

Victor raised the gun, leveled it, and fired, even as he turned.

To a writer's ear, the first sentence sounds better because it puts the emphasis on *fired*, not on *turned*. Read samples of good writers that do this such as: Diane Ackerman, John F. Kennedy, Winston Churchill, or Carl Sagan. Sentences, paragraphs, and whole pieces all drive toward the rhythm, force, and power of the end note. This is where you want to embed the most significant words or messages (and it's the real reason not to end with a preposition, except when it's awkward not to).

Problem: Endless connectives turn the whole paper into one monstrous "sentence" that destroys any sense of meaning.

Strategies:

1. ***Encourage the short sentence.*** Short sentences are especially important when the content is complex or unfamiliar to the reader because they allow the reader to feel in control. We need to teach students the value of manageable sentences. They add clarity. And contrary to the rumors, they challenge the writer. It's hard to hide in a small sentence; you need to say something.

2. ***No ands or buts.*** Ask students to write 3 paragraphs with no *ands* or *buts* or *because* at all. This is challenging, but quite possible.

3. ***Listen to the punctuation.*** Students sometimes omit punctuation because they simply do not hear it. Start with a piece free of punctuation. Read it aloud, pausing clearly at each punctuation mark. Use inflection to accentuate the punctuation. Ask students to fill in the punctuation they hear as you read.